

Teachers' beliefs regarding student with special educational needs from different backgrounds: stereotypes and judgments of student competence

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Abstract

Background: Stereotypes influence decisions concerning the educational instruction and pathways of students with special educational needs (SEN) or ethnic backgrounds and hence may contribute to educational (in)equalities. Stereotypes reflect beliefs about the members of social groups (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Out of such stereotypes, expectations develop, which in turn effect perception and judgments (Ferguson, 2003). The application of stereotype knowledge generally reduces the complexity of observations and is therefore a relatively quick and effortless way to process information (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). The use of student stereotypes may however bias teachers' judgments as the cognitive processes underlying such judgments only rely on a minimum of cues (Gigerenzer, 2008). The consistently reported social/ethnicity bias in the identification of SEN may be indicative of teachers' stereotypical expectations about students. More specifically, teachers may hold different expectations regarding the learning and behaviour of students with differing SEN or different backgrounds which, in turn, could affect their judgments regarding student achievement as teachers may not consider individuating information, but instead rely on stereotypical beliefs (Fiske & Neuberg, 1990). Research has provided evidence that teachers' stereotypical expectations associated with student background or SEN affect the cognitive processes underlying teachers' perceptions and judgments (Glock & Krolak-Schwerdt, 2013; Glock, Krolak-Schwerdt, & Pit-ten Cate, 2015; Hornstra, Denessen, Bakker, van den Bergh, & Voeten, 2010). Furthermore, research has indicated that students with immigrant background are disproportionately more often identified as having SEN (Dyson & Gallannaugh, 2008).

Aim: The aim of the current study therefore was to examine to what extent teachers' beliefs in regards to students with SEN from different backgrounds may contribute to

this disproportionality. More specifically it investigated to what extent stereotypes and judgments of student academic achievement varied as a function of SEN and immigrant background.

Method: Twenty-eight experienced primary school teachers rated the competence and warmth of students with behavioral problems or learning difficulties using vignettes (Lanfranchi & Jenny, 2005) as perceived by the general society (Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007), whereby immigrant background was systematically varied by the name of the student. Teachers also provided judgments of student achievement (German and Mathematics).

Results: Results of different repeated measures ANOVAs revealed that teachers' stereotypes for students with learning difficulties and behavioral problems differ, but are independent of the immigrant background of the student. More specifically, student with learning difficulties were rated less competent and disruptive but more warm compared to students with behavioral problems regardless of their background. In contrast, both SEN and immigrant background affected judgments of academic achievement. That is, teacher ratings of academic achievement for students with learning difficulties were lower than for students with behavioral problems for both German and Mathematics, whereby students with SEN and immigrant background received lower ratings for German (for both types of SEN) and Mathematics (for students with behavioral problems only) than other students.

Discussion: Our findings are in line with previous research demonstrating differential stereotypes towards students with SEN. Interestingly, the possible double vulnerability of students with immigrant background and SEN was only detected in ratings of academic achievement. As immigrant background was only indicated by varying the name of the student, these differences in judgments can be attributed to teachers' stereotypical expectations concerning different social groups. In sum, results indicate that although overall stereotypes concerning SEN may dominate possible stereotypes concerning migration background when presented with student descriptions focusing on SEN, a double vulnerability may be present in the actual judgments of academic achievement. Such judgments are major determinants of educational pathways, hence this finding may contribute to the understanding of the origins of the disproportionate number of students with immigrant background in special programs or settings.

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